

The Roots of Reactionary Tech Oligarchy and the Need for Radical Democratic Alternatives

Johan Farkas and Aurelien Mondon

Abstract

The aim for this commentary is two-fold: first, we seek to outline how decades of liberal “post-democratic” hegemony—prevalent across liberal democratic parliaments, journalism, and academia—have enabled the rise of reactionary tech oligarchy. Second, we call for cross-disciplinary and cross-societal alliances that not only reject depoliticized euphemisms such as “polarization,” “populism,” and “post-truth,” but also actively commit to building radical democratic alternatives to both the failed liberal democratic status quo and its authoritarian outgrowth. Departing from the growing overt involvements of tech billionaires in authoritarian movements—financially, politically, discursively—we build on emergent scholarship to highlight failures in understanding the rise of reactionary tech, through its historical roots, financial and political power, and discursive reach.

Keywords: reactionary tech oligarchy, reactionary politics, far right, authoritarianism, post-democracy, populism, post-truth, polarization

It is tempting to paint reactionary tech barons as comic book villains: evil billionaire geniuses whose unquenchable thirst for power corrupted them from within. Yet this picture is fundamentally flawed, as it not only overplays how much they ever contributed to their fields and society but also underplays how their threat to democracy was always in plain sight, enabled by a system that claimed to protect the world from unchecked power. Far from acting as a bulwark, as proclaimed by liberal institutions and elite actors (van Dijk, 1993), decades of so-called “post-democratic” and “post-political” rule—erasing popular dispute, financializing all aspects of human lives, and promoting naive “faith that the computer is destined to become a potent equalizer in modern society” (Winner, 1984, p. 592)—paved the way for the dual rise of reactionary authoritarians and tech oligarchs. All of this was predictable and none of it was inevitable.

This does not mean that the personal roles of Musk, Zuckerberg, Thiel, or Bezos should be ignored, since both their wealth and drive to dismantle the last remaining democratic safeguards and embolden far-right extremists have played a significant role in hastening the resurgence of fascism. Yet, focusing on their individual psychology has taken attention away from politics, economy, ideology, and power. Even while their anti-democratic alignments were on full display, they were continually given the benefit of doubt and depoliticized as simply “polarizing” or “populist” (Elsesser, 2023; Peters, 2022; Pogue, 2022). This personalization and euphemization of tech politics and authoritarianism has concealed their fundamental and long-standing threats to democracy and hastened the mainstreaming of such politics (Brown et al., 2023).

With the tech billionaires' pledge of allegiance to Trump and his fascist project, all pretense has been dropped. In fact, several tech leaders were already openly celebrating and taking cues from fascist thinkers and history (Morrow, 2023; Nicholls, 2024). In 2023, venture capitalist Marc Andreessen declared Filippo Tommaso Marinetti—leading figure in the Italian futurist movement—a “saint of techno-optimism.” Marinetti co-wrote *The Fascist Manifesto*, a foundational text of Italian fascism, and envisioned futurists as “demolition entrepreneurs” (Marinetti cited in Gentile, 2005, p, 93) who “demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism, and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice” (Marinetti, [1909] 2004, p. 28). Mirroring this history, contemporary calls for colonizing Mars and replacing the government with AI go hand-in-hand with violent militarism, misogyny, anti-LGBTBQ+ politics, ableism, classism, and the dismantling of collective safety nets and rule of law.

Crucially, scholars had long foreseen that the corporatization of information and communication technologies would not only produce new regimes of social control and surveillance but also threaten the very possibility of an egalitarian basis for democracy (Hills & Papathanassopoulos, 1991; Mosco, 1994; Winner, 1984; Wolin, 2008). These warnings were largely ignored, however, due to sustained faith among liberal elites in “push-button fantasies about the information age” (Mosco, 1994, p. 107): utopian beliefs about digital technologies automatically solving social problems and being tools of democracy. These have thrived, even in supposedly critical quarters, promoting the notion that “the technology of the Internet embodies the culture of freedom” (Castells, 2012, p. 231).

To better describe our current context, we use the term *reactionary tech oligarchy*. We argue that it encompasses the current historical conjuncture, as it stresses how these movements are elite-driven and top-down, something both “reactionary” and “oligarchy” make clear (Chakravarty & Schmon, 2025; Vergara, 2020). This stands in contrast to terms such as “techno-populism” and “cyberlibertarianism,” which can lend a false democratic or progressive air to such politics (Goyvaerts et al., 2024, Hunger & Paxton, 2022, Golumbia, 2024). Furthermore, while tech is often seen as forward-thinking and future-oriented, the U.S. tech industry has long been interwoven with reactionary and elitist conceptions of politics (Lewis, 2024).

The aim for this commentary is two-fold: first, we seek to outline how decades of liberal “post-democratic” hegemony—prevalent across liberal democratic parliaments, journalism, and academia—have enabled the rise of reactionary tech oligarchy. Second, we call for cross-disciplinary and cross-societal alliances that not only reject depoliticized euphemisms such as “polarization,” “populism,” and “post-truth,” but also actively commit to building radical

democratic alternatives to both the failed liberal democratic status quo and its authoritarian outgrowth.

Reactionary tech oligarchy and its roots in liberal “post-democracy”

As extreme as the actions taken by Trump and reactionary tech oligarchs are, it is crucial not to exceptionalize them. Now is not the “time of monsters” as per Gramsci’s overused (and mistranslated) quote, as monsters would suggest forces outside of our control and even reality (see Andersson, 2024). These moves are ideological and match onto wider trends across liberal democracies, which have been well documented and yet widely ignored (Brown, 2017; Losurdo, 2016; Mondon, 2025; Slobodian, 2018). As Harris has explored (2022), Silicon Valley ideology extends far beyond Palo Alto and reaches deep into capitalism and neoliberalism’s own authoritarian tendencies.

As with the resurgence of the wider far right, the rise of reactionary tech oligarchy builds on decades of so-called “post-democratic” rule, in which liberal elites, sold to the neoliberal agenda, redefined politics as the technocratic search for “optimal,” “rational,” and “consensus-based” solutions to “free” the market (Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 1999). The *post* in “post-democracy” does not refer to a historical stage after “real” democracy, but instead to the “government practice and conceptual legitimation of a democracy *after* the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people” (Rancière, 1999, p. 102). While democracy was always limited and precarious under the liberal settlement, the fundamental ideals of popular sovereignty and agency have rapidly and paradoxically become redefined as an *obstacle* to democracy since the 1980s at least (Brown, 2017; Crouch, 2004; Finlayson, 2024; Rancière, 1999). As such, post-democracy “captures the ways in which democratic iconography is used to provide legitimacy to our current conjuncture, without the necessary opportunities for popular participation which [really existing] democracy demands” (Yates & Mondon, 2025, p. 14).

A closely related term is “post-politics,” which similarly captures the rendering of political disagreement as a hindrance to democracy. Building on the work of Rancière (1999), we argue that we have reached a stage where politics—the rare occasions where “consensus” is challenged by the many parts of society excluded from it—has become increasingly curtailed by the rise of what Wolin calls “inverted totalitarianism” (2007). Through fantasies of the “end of history” and “third way politics” beyond left or right, liberal politicians from both the center-right and center-left have overseen the rise of economic inequalities, the sell-off of any and all public infrastructure to conglomerates, and the extensive policing of political action beyond voting for the lesser of two evils (Finlayson, 2024).

The result is a simulacrum of politics—what Rancière (1999) calls “the police”—where contestation is limited within the bounds of the status quo, while voices that could risk challenging it are made inaudible. As Ling (2021, p. 11) suggests, this simulacrum of democracy can be witnessed in “the production of a perverse form of state-sanctioned controvers[ies], whereby the presentation of an almost perpetual state of disorder paradoxically functions to prohibit the very possibility of real disruptive creation and the scandal it occasions, and in this way functions to maintain and even strengthen the existing order.”

The resurgence of reactionary politics finds its roots in the order of police and liberalism’s own innate ambivalence and ability to accommodate both limited progress and reaction in the name of protecting the status quo. As Mondon (2025) writes elsewhere, “the liberal order and its progressive outlook have always been dependent on the forces it has had to contend with. [Therefore,] it should have always been clear that, should the balance shift back toward reaction, liberalism could just as well adapt, more or less willingly, as it indeed did in 1930s Germany, even if this would cause its ultimate destruction” (p. 53).

While democracy was never fully actualized in its most emancipatory forms (Rancière, 2007), the dominance of the “post-democratic” zeitgeist under neoliberalism has hastened the destruction of countermovements and institutions that liberalism had previously come to accept as a necessity to protect the capitalist order (Slobodian, 2018; Whyte, 2019). Decades of deregulations associated with increased securitization have paved the way for the quick takeover of the state by Trump and reactionary tech oligarchs in the US.

The bulwark fantasy was always mainstream complacency

The capitulation of the liberal hegemony can be witnessed the world over, albeit with context-dependent outcomes and victims (Pinheiro-Machado & Vargas-Maia, 2023; Bauer et al, 2025). As reactionary movements resurge, it has been common to witness on the part of the mainstream elite—in media and politics, but also academia—either a complacent or altogether defeatist positioning. Outflanking reactionaries by fueling moral panics, promising ever stricter border control and crackdowns on resistance against neoliberal destruction are increasingly accepted as the only way to defeat the far right (Mondon, 2024).

Analysis of the (re-)ascendance of reactionary politics has often amounted to suggesting that “the crisis of democracy is not only sudden, but that it is due to a waning capacity for engaging in consensus-based dialogue and respecting expert-led decision-making” (Farkas & Schou, 2023, p.148). Rather than acknowledging the systemic failures of the “post-political” project, liberal politicians and academics have instead doubled down (Farkas & Schou, 2023). Proposed and implemented solutions—from fact-checking to surveillance; from bolstering traditional “truth-

keepers” such as journalism to increasing state censorship—all tend to reinforce the idea that political discontent must be tackled through policing people at the expense of their ability to participate in political decision-making. The democratic deficit of liberal democracy should not only be left untouched, this line of argument goes, but actively deepened by placing decision-making in “expert” hands, while blaming “the people” for not being sufficiently enlightened and attuned to truth-making institutions (Farkas & Schou, 2020; Yates & Mondon, 2025).

Faith in journalism as the “fourth estate” was always naive at best, complicit at worst. Similarly, allowing democracy to be held ransom to the whims of a billionaire class whose interests are in direct conflict with peoples’, users’, and workers’ was never going to end well. As such, responsibility for the current conjuncture should not primarily be sought in the reactionaries’ success or popularity, but in the failure of liberal democratic institutions to prioritize democracy over capital. Democracy does not “die in darkness,” but in full view in the hands of reactionary (tech) oligarchs and their fascist allies who exploit decades of deliberate weakening of democratic institutions. It is no coincidence that this takes place as the public sphere has drastically narrowed, through the ever-increasing concentration of media ownership across both news and platform media the world over, while liberal politicians have offered little to no public service alternatives (Fenton, 2024; Noam, 2016; Pickard, 2020).

Even the rare mainstream media that remains somewhat independent from reactionary tech oligarchy have often refused to take a principled stand or critically interrogate its roots in decades of political abetting of growing corporate power. In a fruitless attempt to appear “neutral” and “objective” (Wallace, 2023) in a landscape increasingly tilted to the right, editorial teams have often hyped their position as arbiters of “real news” against “fake news,” framing right-wing attacks on democracy as euphemized problems of “post-truth,” “populism,” and “polarization” (Brown & Mondon, 2020; Farkas & Schou, 2023; Gilroy-Ware, 2020). Simultaneously, news outlets have embraced moral panics on immigration, trans rights, climate change, and DEI as “legitimate concerns” worthy of “balanced” coverage. By positioning themselves in the middle of these “debates,” media institutions have not only normalized reactionary talking-points as worthy of debate, but sat squarely on the side of reactionaries for whom democratic engagement was never the point: this was never about free speech, but about the unchecked right of the powerful to dehumanize others in pursuit of profit and domination (Titley, 2020).

Even the early emancipatory promises of the internet as a vector of democratization have faded under corporate monopolies and control. It should always have been clear that the ability of people to share information does not equal democratic participation, as this requires decision-making power. As Fuchs (2017, p. 82) notes, scholars of digital media have tended to advance a “vulgar

and reductionist notion of participation (simply meaning that users create, curate, circulate, or critique content),” thus ignoring the fundamental role of political economy. Meanwhile, media and tech oligarchs have accrued unprecedented influence on how billions of people stay informed about the world and have since gained direct access to decision-making power with global consequences.

The construction of a public arena where the choice has become increasingly narrow between reactionaries and the status quo refusing to take a stand against them has prevented serious alternatives to rise. We know what kind of world could respond to the many crises we face; from the climate emergency to the rise of inequalities and the demise of actually existing democratic spaces. But we also know that such a world would require fundamental changes to economic and political systems and that such change would go against the interests of both reactionary and liberal elites. Ultimately, the rise of techno-fascism, the end goal of reactionary tech oligarchy, is being enabled in the pursuit of profit and growth benefitting the very few at the expense of most. We can keep relying on old recipes: appease the far right, try to reason with it, or pretend existing institutions will save us. Or we can accept that these strategies have been key to mainstreaming reactionary politics in a vain effort to save the liberal hegemony.

Beyond grass-roots organizing and resistance core to such a project, this moment urgently calls for bold, critical research and alliances across academia, journalism, and civil society and for those with privileged access to public discourse to take responsibility. They should not only critically address the roots and implications of the global reactionary movement across politics and tech but also help build radical intersectional counter-movements of solidarity, care, and democratic alternatives. For academics, this involves challenging white methods and epistemologies of ignorance (Mills, 1997; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008) and working across disciplinary and geographical boundaries, since no field alone can study the scale of current attacks, nor be safe from being the target. It also involves challenging academic institutions that continue to let reactionary tech billionaires influence university programs through so-called philanthropy. Finally, it requires us to be open to imagining a world beyond the reactionary project and the failed liberal democratic status quo.

Time will tell whether it is too late to stop the slide towards authoritarianism and the catastrophes that will befall most. As liberal institutions appear weaker than ever, the climate emergency shows no sign of abetting or being addressed, there is no choice but to take decisive and radical action if we are to turn the tide against the fundamentally anti-democratic reactionary tech oligarchy. One can only hope that in the rubble of emancipatory struggles of old remain the seeds of those that will help us survive this all too predictable outcome.

References

- Andersson, R. (2024). Security and subversion in a time of monsters. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2024.420209>
- Andreessen, M. (2023, October 16). The techno-optimist manifesto. Andreessen Horowitz. <https://a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/>
- Bauer, A. J., Roy, S., & Gago, V. (2025). Toward comparative analysis of right-authoritarian politics: Argentina, India, and the US. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 18, 9–14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcae051>
- Brown, K., & Mondon, A. (2020). Populism, the media and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study. *Politics*, 41, 279–295.
- Brown, K., Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2023). The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: towards a heuristic framework. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 28, 162–179.
- Castells, M. (2012) *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Polity Press).
- Brown, W. (2017). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Zone books.
- Chakravarty, U., & Schmon, J. (2025). The oligarchic unconscious of liberal republicanism. *Constellations*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12774>
- Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Polity Press.
- Elsesser, K. (2023, July 2). Elon Musk deems 'cis' a Twitter slur—Here's why it is so polarizing. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kimelsesser/2023/07/02/elon-musk-deems-cis-a-twitter-slurheres-why-its-is-so-polarizing/>
- Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2020). Post-truth discourses and their limits: A democratic crisis? In Terzis G., Kloza D., Kuźelewska E. & Trottier D. (Eds.), *Disinformation and digital media as a challenge for democracy* (pp. 103–126). Intersentia. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781839700422.008>
- Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2023). *Post-truth, fake news and democracy: Mapping the politics of falsehood*. Routledge.
- Fenton, N. (2024). *Democratic delusions: How the media hollows out democracy and what we can do about it*. Polity Press.
- Finlayson, L. (2024). On lesser evilism. *New Left Review*, 145, 59–64.
- Fuchs, C. (2017) *Social Media: A Critical Introduction (2nd ed.)*. Sage Publications.
- Gentile, E. (2005). *The origins of fascist ideology, 1918–1925*. Enigma Books.
- Gilroy-Ware, M. (2020). *After the fact? The truth about fake news*. Repeater.
- Golumbia, D. (2024). *Cyberlibertarianism: The right-wing politics of digital technology*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Goyvaerts, J., Brown, K., Mondon, A., De Cleen, B., & Glynos, J. (2024). On the politics of 'populism': The case of populist hype. In Katsambekis G. and Stavrakakis Y. (eds) *Elgar Research Handbook on Populism* (pp. 527-539). Elgar.

Harris, M. (2022). *Palo Alto: A history of California, capitalism and the world*. Little, Brown and Company.

Hills, J., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (1991). *The democracy gap*. Greenwood Press.

Hunger, S., & Paxton, F. (2022). What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10, 617–633.

Lewis, R. (2024). Tech's right turn: The rise of reactionary politics in Silicon Valley and online. Stanford University.

Ling, A. (2021). *Scandalous times: Contemporary creativity and the rise of state-sanctioned controversy*. Bloomsbury.

Losurdo, D. (2016). *Liberalism: A counter-history*. Verso.

Marinetti, F. T (2004). The futurist manifesto. In Pugliese S. G. (Ed.), *Fascism, anti-fascism, and the resistance in Italy, 1919 to the present* (pp. 25–29). Rowman & Littlefield.

Mills, C. W. (1997). *The racial contract*. Cornell University Press.

Mondon, A. (2025). Really existing liberalism, the bulwark fantasy, and the enabling of reactionary, far right politics. *Constellations*, 32(1), 47-58.

Mondon, A. (2024). 'Hegemonic defeatism: The mainstreaming of far-right politics in France.' *Parliamentary Affairs*.

Morrow, A. (2023, November 17). With antisemitic tweet, Elon Musk reveals his 'actual truth.' *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/17/business/elon-musk-reveals-his-actual-truth/index.html>

Mosco, V. (1994). The political economy of communication: Lessons from the founders. In: Babe R. E. (eds) *Information and Communication in Economics* (pp. 105–124). Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Nicholls, F. (2024, August 5). Peter Thiel's pre-Nazi Germany comparison to US resurfaces. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/peter-thiel-pre-nazi-germany-us-comparison-resurfaces-1934760>

Noam, E. M. (2016). *Who owns the world's media? Media concentration and ownership around the world*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199987238.001.0001>

Peters, J. (2022, December 10). 'Critics say Musk has revealed himself as a conservative. It's not so simple.' *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/10/business/media/elon-musk-politics-twitter.html>

Pickard, V. (2020). *Democracy without journalism? Confronting the misinformation society*. Oxford University Press.

Pinheiro-Machado, R., Vargas-Maia, T. (eds) (2023). *The rise of the radical right in the global south*. Routledge.

Pogue, J. (2022, April 20). Inside the new right, where Peter Thiel is placing his biggest bets. *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>

Rancière, J. (1999). *Dis-agreement: Politics and philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press.

Rancière, J. (2007). *Hatred of democracy*. Verso.

Slobodian, Q. (2018). *Globalists: The end of empire and the birth of neoliberalism*. Harvard University Press.

Sullivan, S., & Tuana, N. (2007). *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. State University of New York Press.

Titely, G. (2020). *Is free speech racist?* Polity Press.

van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4, 249–283.

Winner, L. (1984). Mythinformation in the high-tech era. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 4, 582–596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/027046768400400609>

Vergara, C. (2020). *Systemic corruption: Constitutional ideas for an anti-oligarchic republic*. Princeton University Press.

Wallace, L. R. (2023). *The view from somewhere*. University of Chicago Press.

Whyte, J. (2019). *The morals of the market: Human rights and the rise of neoliberalism*. Verso.

Wolin, S. (2008). *Democracy Inc.: Managed democracy and the specter of inverted totalitarianism*. Princeton University Press.

Yates, A., & Mondon, A. (2025). ‘Get off your high horse and vote for us’: The anti-populist construction of the elite and the people. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241309272>

Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (2008). *White logic, White methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Littlefield.